

Virtual passport: Undergrad helps to map street of Renaissance collections

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

By Niki Kapsambelis

In Renaissance Rome, if you had the right connections and knew the right people, you could walk down the street, knock on a few doors, and visit some of the most revered sculptures of the ancient masters.

Now, thanks in part to the efforts of sophomore Lynn Tan, you can take the same virtual walk without so much as a letter of introduction.

Tan, an English literature major who hails from Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, created the map with Kathleen Christian, an assistant professor in the Department of History of Art and Architecture, in the spring of 2006 as part of the College of Arts and Sciences' First Experiences in Research program.

The two worked on the project for the bulk of the spring semester with an eye toward using it to catalogue sculptures for a textbook that Christian, who specializes in Renaissance art, is writing. They met when Tan read a flyer for the First Experiences program in her sociology class and searched online for projects that interested her.

"I had a lot of art background from high school, so I thought I would sign up," she says. "In the future, I don't want to sit around in an office and do the same thing all the time. I want some freedom, and I thought research was one way to do it."

Tan and Christian began by scanning a replica of an 18th-century map of Rome. Christian told her young protégé where the collections were, and Tan plotted them on the map, assigning numbers to the houses that held antiquities. They made a key to correspond the house numbers with specific collections.

At the end of the semester, Tan created a PowerPoint presentation that showed the map as well as biographies of the families who owned the houses.

Tan listed things she had learned about the families, such as which clans were fighting and who had stolen another family's antique sculptures.

"A lot of what I did was unwritten, because sometimes we'd do research together, or I would look at images and we'd talk back and forth," Tan says. "When I combined all the research we did together, I saw how the sculptures made an interesting history of these Renaissance families."



Undergraduate Lynn Tan (right) and her faculty advisor, Kathleen Christian, stand outside the Frick Fine Arts Building which houses the Department of History of Art and Architecture where Tan participated in research on Italian Renaissance art.

Photo by Joe Kapelewski

Christian says the idea was to produce a map that would re-create what it would have been like to walk down a street and peek in on masterpieces.

"We found there were a lot of collections in important streets in Rome," she says.

The project offered Tan a lesson in topography; she and Christian searched the Internet for a satellite view of the streets today and compared them with the 18th century map to see how the street plan had changed.

"She's a really sweet person," Christian says of Tan.

"I think she got the most out of [the research] by stepping back and seeing how the city changed over time. Maybe she hadn't thought about things like that before. These historic cities have so many different layers to them."

Tan, who is considering a career in teaching, believes the experience provided valuable insights, even if it was outside her major.

She credits Christian with being open with her and showing her when research went awry as well as when it went as expected.

"Even if you don't go into exactly the same field as your mentor, it's good to have a reference that you worked with a professor," she says. "Also, it's good at the end of the year to organize your own poster presentation and be able to explain your ideas to other people."

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